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Impact on the agricultural sector of vegetation and land management policies

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Past and current practices of land and vegetation management by the agricultural sector and regional industries

It should be stated at the beginning Australia now is a very different place to when Captain James Cook and Joseph Banks, aboard the Endeavour, arrived at Botany Bay on April 19, 1770.

Since then two centuries of European inhabitation have transformed the landscape into a vast, vibrant production house of livestock and agriculture sustaining the economy until today.

Past practices of land and vegetation management however, by Europeans have been at best, impractical and at worst, destructive.

Suffice to say early settlers would have starved in this land, far away from England had they not practiced the only farming methods they knew which originated from their native country.

Interaction with the 'Indians' as Banks named them revealed a hunting and gathering society which Banks noted 'had no visible agricultural ability at all.'

Their food sources were the animals that roamed the plains, the fish in rivers and sea and plants growing in the often sparse soils. Aborigines had learned over millennia that grass growth was seasonal and depended entirely on fire and rainfall to promote healthy growth.

Most natural grasses soon turned rank and largely unpalatable to native grazing animals after seeding. Firestick farming was utilised to burn old growth and promote grass regeneration even in dry seasons.

Newly shooting grass after fires attracted marsupials such as macropods, an essential food source for Aborigines. The firestick was the only method of farming adopted by the early inhabitants which controlled eucalyptus, acacia and woody weed regrowth.

Hence the absence of woody undergrowth and thickening as noted by Banks and Cook.

“The Soil wherever we saw it consisted of either swamps or light sandy soil on which grew very few species of trees, one which was large yeilding a gum much like sanguis draconis, but every place was coverd with vast quantities of grass....” May 1, 1770, Banks’ daily log.

Nearly every one of Banks’ daily diary entries recorded fires and ‘smoak’ on the mainland and some islands as the Endeavour plied its way northwards from Botany Bay to Cooktown between April and July, 1770.

Inland explorer Ludwig Leichardt traversing Queensland’s interior recorded only ‘thickets’, savannah and vast open plains many of which today are covered by native trees and other introduced vegetation.. *Port Essington Journey 1844-45*

Uncontrolled woody regrowth, particularly in areas of Queensland today has rendered vast areas of once productive grazing country as virtually useless.

Cape York Peninsula is a startling example of decades of widespread land mismanagement by the Qld National Parks and Wildlife Service and indirectly the Qld Labor Government.

Woody regrowth has completely overtaken most national parks, environmental reserves and Aboriginal land, which covers perhaps 60 per cent of the of 137,000 km² Peninsula north of 16°S.

Pastoral properties have also been impacted.

Frank Jardine and his cattle arrived at Somerset on Cape York in 1864 and a few decades later, gone was the Aboriginal firestick. Natural grasses were needed to feed domestic grazing animals and within 50 years vast areas of ti-tree and eucalypt regrowth overtook once open plains and savannah. *(Olive Vale Station, Laura)*

Cape York Peninsula, not unlike the entire eastern seaboard and hinterland, had been kept ‘open and park-like’ *(Banks)* by Aboriginal firestick for a thousand years, but is largely useless land today.

The state government has indicated its willingness to turn the whole Peninsula into World Heritage, a move which has enraged Aboriginal inhabitants.

Indeed if a botanical survey of prolific tree species on Cape York was undertaken today it would reveal no old growth trees such as Darwin Stringybark (*Eucalyptus tetradonta*) Cooktown Ironwood (*Erythrophleum chlorostachys*) or Cypress Pine (*genus Callitris*) more than 200 years old.

Many pastoralists and researchers agree today there are far many more trees and other vegetation covering Australia than in 1770.

Today pastoralists manage their holdings using different fire methodology but ultimately it is intended to have the same effect as firestick farming.

Obviously pastoralists are behind the eight ball today. After years of drought or economic necessity (driven by rapacious banks) a farmer has left a paddock well-grassed to carry a fire for control of woody undergrowth, but has been forced to feed it off with cattle or sheep for market readiness to meet an interest payment.

The woody undergrowth or thickening continues unabated until it becomes impossible to manage with fire and impenetrable to man or stock. It becomes a haven for feral animals.

Today's trading banks, in the absence of an understanding agricultural bank, or the Commonwealth Development Bank have had carte blanche with the pastoral industry as the avalanche of forced property sales can attest.

The next round of foreclosures, as payback for instigating the banking industry Royal Commission, will take out the remnants of Queensland family farms.

Farmers have long-suffered the unavailability of a suitable source of development funds and highly restrictive and in some cases unlawful vegetation management laws enacted by ideological, socialist state governments.

The Environment and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 Cth is a result of the now infamous United Nations agreement, Agenda 21 to which Australia is a signatory(1992)..

The science behind activities such as back burning, clearing and rehabilitation

For the past and some of the present generations of pastoralists, fire prevention is always better than a cure.

Farmers would much rather manage a fire than have an uncontrollable blaze enter their property from an errant neighbor or national park.

Ever since land has been taken up by farmers, fires either have been a problem or a management tool particularly in Queensland's brigalow belt and its vast areas of savannah and western downs.

If a property has a boundary with a public road or highway it is inevitable a fire will start if conditions are right.

On Cape York the remaining few cattle properties maintain a graded fire break along the fence line.

Unfortunately some indigenous people who drive these roads cannot resist practicing their forefather's firestick habit even if it is not their land.

This is why firebreaks are vitally important for protection of grass, fences, stock and infrastructure.

Constructing a firebreak usually requires a bulldozer of sufficient horsepower to clear a minimum five metre track through any type of terrain or vegetation.

Tree clearing can be necessary and the dozer should have a tree pusher and scrub ROPS canopy to do it safely.

Cleared trees usually are pushed into the paddock so any cleared vegetation will burn in a fire and away from a fence.

When controlling an intentional burn or a malicious fire it cannot be fought without a fire break.

When burning a paddock, a permit first has to be sought from a local fire warden who knows the immediate weather situation and other conditions relevant to fires.

Some of the conditions of a permit state there must be a constructed break of at least five metres wide and the landowner must provide at least three staff and minimum firefighting equipment such as a water tank with a pump, drip torches and suitable clothing. In some cases a grader or bulldozer could be necessary.

For decades land owners have been complying with these common sense provisions and in most cases there are no issues with fires getting away.

When lighting a fire, a land owner with a drip torch (petrol/diesel mix fire lighter) lights along the down- wind perimeter of the break and gives the blaze time to burn into the wind.

After a sufficient amount of grass is burnt the opposite end of the paddock is lit in the same manner and the fire travels down- wind to meet up with the already burnt perimeter at the other end of the paddock and self-extinguishes.

It is a relatively simple method which has worked successfully for 100 years.

It should be noted that in south western Queensland the officious Environment Department has been prosecuting landowners for clearing what it claims are over-width fire breaks in the mulga (*Acacia aneura*) district.

Mulga is vital to land owners as a drought feed source, yet farmers have been prosecuted for clearing too much or in a wrong zone as a part of a complicated property mapping system.

Mulga grows thickly and in the right conditions can burn quite fiercely. Therefore a wider break than in other ecosystems is required to maintain the integrity of fences and the safety of stock and firefighters, a fact lost on ideological bureaucrats.

Rehabilitation of firebreaks if properly constructed is unnecessary. In some cases urgent fire breaks constructed in the face of a wild fire using a dozer or grader are pushed without any regard for gullies or creek crossings.

As a RFS first officer in charge of an uncontrolled fire I once ordered in a large dozer to control an unintentional forest fire which was threatening a coffee plantation and cane paddock.

Minor, dry gully crossings were required but there was no time to construct any groundwater erosion control measures in the face of the fire. It later burnt out on the hastily prepared break and the plantation was saved.

The RFS in these circumstances covers the cost of the machine hire. For any rehabilitation, the landowner would be expected to undertake this work using his own resources.

In most government-controlled land other than Forestry, the overwhelming evidence shows land managers have been reluctant to conduct hazard-reduction burning.

Even in the cooler months in Queensland when hazard reduction burns are efficient and safe, government does not act.

The recent catastrophic fires in the Bundaberg district are indicative of a complete lack of sound ecological management which led to enormous economic and social losses after more than half a million hectares was lost to catastrophic wildfire.

Fortunately no lives were reported lost due to fires.



Deepwater (north of Bundaberg) catastrophic fire leaves forests completely denuded and unlikely to ever recover (Pic-Catholic Leader)

Reports indicate there were almost no firebreaks in the vast areas of national parks or state land which burnt and spread to private property causing huge financial losses and social dislocation.

These fires through a lack of hazard reduction burns for the preceding years caused irreparable damage to the landscape, denuding forests of all growth, much of which will not regrow due to the intensity of the heat. The roots of stumps, remnants of once-vigorous trees were burning up to one metre underground, according to fire fighters.

The Tasmania fires of several years ago had a similar effect.

The economic impact of vegetation and land management policies, regulations and restrictions

I have broadly covered the detrimental impact of ideological vegetation management policies but they should be examined in more detail.

Greens/ALP-driven socialist left policies regarding vegetation management over the past 20 years have caused much social unrest in rural areas.

Previous law-abiding farmers have been dragged through the courts by the ‘tree police’ for inadvertently removing a tree or making a fire break too wide, removing trees when constructing a dam, clearing thickening or fixing a watercourse. There are numerous landowners who have been mercilessly prosecuted under Queensland’s Vegetation Management Act 1999,

In 1999 the Commonwealth Environment and Biodiversity Conservation Act was introduced, giving state governments open slather to unleash their pent-up ideological bents on the hapless agricultural sector.

Witness the 2014 murder of a NSW Environment Department tree policeman by a fed-up land owner defending his right to make a living and get God-given sustenance from his land. (<https://wp.me/p2dFb5-Pm>)

Regional earthmoving companies folded overnight as former police officers and other government employees were transformed into the dreaded ‘tree police’ then let off the chain to besiege honest land owners.

The courts were filled with landowners facing criminal charges for ‘illegal’ clearing, allegedly without a permit or for clearing outside of a permit condition.

The late Graham Acton of Rockhampton in 2004 was dragged through the courts and fined a reported \$100,000 plus legal costs for ‘illegally’ clearing brigalow (*Acacia harpophylla*) regrowth on one of his CQ properties. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2004-10-11/more-tree-clearing-under-investigation/566520>

He said afterwards he would make more in three years from the block he cleared, than the amount of the fine.

This clearing was a normal part of sustainable land management of regrowth which had been previously carried out for five decades throughout the brigalow belt without any problems from the state.

In Queensland the ALP government is being spurred on by city-based, so-called conservation bodies namely the WWF and Australian Conservation Foundation among others, while the DNR is scouring satellite photos of every square inch of the state looking for clearing activities.

The electoral benefits in the south east of the state suit the ALP which in any case traditionally hates farmers.

How the ALP government has lawfully assumed authority over freehold (Deed of grant in fee simple) property has not yet been ascertained. In the freeholding process the farmer has already paid for the trees growing on his property, hence vegetation ownership is assumed.

Commonwealth v New South Wales [1923] HCA 34 (1923) 33 CLR 1 (9 August 1923)

https://larryhannigan.files.wordpress.com/2017/05/commonwealth_v_nsw_isaacs_j-at_42_and_45_title_of_sovereign_-_pure_legal_estate.pdf

J Isaacs delivering a judgement on private land ownership which has been upheld in more recent cases:

“A fee simple is the most extensive in quantum, and the most absolute in respect to the rights which it confers, of all estates known to the law.”

“It confers, and since the beginning of legal history it always has conferred, the lawful right to exercise over, upon, and in respect to, the land, every act of ownership which can enter into the imagination, including the right to commit unlimited waste; and, for all practical purposes of ownership, it differs from the absolute dominion of a chattel, in nothing except the physical indestructibility of its subject.”

Economic impact

The overall economic impact of farmers being prevented from sustainable land clearing is probably inestimable, but when such policies reduce the stock carrying capacity of an average holding by an estimated 20 per cent then if extrapolated across the total of state herd numbers the cost is staggering.

In 2016 the national cattle herd total was estimated at 25 million head, being managed by 47,021 businesses worth \$16.5 billion to the economy. (ABS/MLA)

Queensland’s share was 10.5 million head, or 37.5 per cent by far the largest number of any state.

About 200,000 are employed in the national red meat industry. Australians each ate 26.7 kilograms of beef in 2017.

Cattle are estimated to have contributed 20 per cent of the total farm value of \$62.8 billion at June, 2017.

The gross value of cattle and calf production including live cattle exports in 2016-17 is estimated at \$12.7 billion. This figure does not include beef production.

Queensland carries about 37.5 per cent of the total herd thus the gross economic loss to the state equates to at least \$4.76 billion.

It should be noted since 2016 Queensland cattle numbers have been drastically reduced due to ongoing drought.

The impact of severe fires on the agricultural landscape, agricultural production and industry in regional, rural and remote areas

As previously mentioned the recent wildfires north of Bundaberg in the Agnes Water and Baffle Creek districts decimated the natural landscape, some of which will never return to its former state.

Private land was also scorched by uncontrolled blazes emanating from national parks.

The affected areas of native forest in national parks according to local reports had few if any serviceable firebreaks and much of the forest areas were inaccessible to the RFS and NPWS staff.

Their own policies prevented them from clearing firebreaks.

Had hazard reduction burning been conducted in previous seasons the damage would have been much less and not allow wildfire to flagellate the ideology behind the present system of national park holdings.

Similarly in the Lakeland district, 50 klms west of Cooktown the Qld Government purchased the 60,000ha Springvale Station in 2016 purportedly for the prevention of sediment runoff onto the Great Barrier Reef via Princes Charlotte Bay.

A report by the Qld Chief Scientist released at the time of the \$6.9m Springvale acquisition revealed there was negligible runoff from this operational cattle property thus making the acquisition unnecessary.

However the Environment Department sallied on oblivious to complaints from the local government authority and almost every land owner in the district.

The local economy lost 4000 head in cattle production and the property had turned into a firebomb of nuclear proportions.

Arsonists were blamed for igniting wildfires along Springvale's highway frontage which turned in a maelstrom for landowners causing economic loss and infrastructure damage.

For more than a month adjoining landowners were forced to down tools and patrol their often inaccessible common boundaries including the unprotected and unoccupied infrastructure at the Springvale homestead complex because the Environment Department did not have one operational firebreak or any fire-fighting equipment on hand to fight the grass-fueled inferno.



Local landowners were forced to protect Springvale Station infrastructure due to a lack of fire preparedness by the state government. Pic- Joy Marriott

Neighbours assisting in fire-fighting while in the face of wildfires, reported the Springvale staff had to contact the Environment Department in Brisbane before they would allow any back-burning on Springvale. The Brisbane staff naturally had no idea whatsoever of the immediate fire-ground conditions or firefighting procedures and the local staff was so inadequately trained, neighbours attending the fire were left in extreme danger. (*Cape York News*)

Fortunately the RFS and their band of gallant, honorary firefighters from Cooktown and elsewhere arrived to assist but the fire had too long and too many fronts. No firebreaks on Springvale made their grateful efforts inconsequential.

The cattle previously had largely been removed leaving 150,000 acres of un-grazed spear grass and other improved species, a recipe for disaster.



Environment Department staff drain a 1000 megalitre dam with a syphon hose on Springvale causing deep erosion and many hundreds of tonnes of sediment to flow into the adjacent East Normanby River and onto the Great Barrier Reef

Neighbours reported the wildfires had decimated the landscape, especially one large area in a north western paddock supposedly acquired to preserve a particular ecosystem as claimed by the department but unknown to former owners or local naturalists.

This natural disaster on Springvale and neighbouring ‘Kings Plains’ another conservation park has revealed the totally inappropriate and inadequate management strategies practiced by the state government and other conservation land managers.

Neighbours have reported substantial economic losses caused by the Kings Plains and Springvale fires entering their properties through inaccessible terrain in spite of all precautions being taken by these cattle producers and farmers to protect their fences, pastures and stock and in some cases their lives.

They also observed singed and burning native animals fleeing from the wildfire front.

Factors that contribute to fire risk in regional, rural and remote areas; and the role the agricultural sector has in working with emergency services and forestry management officials in managing fire risk.

The agricultural sector performs probably the greatest role in fire management in regional areas aided by Rural Fire Service volunteers and in some cases urban brigades..

Local brigades are formed in farming and grazing districts with the aid of the RFS full-time officers.

Funding of volunteer brigades usually is by a levy on council rates but in more populated areas of urban encroachment some units hold raffles and other fund raising activities.

These days volunteers are becoming harder to attract. Many Queensland brigades consist of over 50's volunteers which is a sad reflection on the state government's partial take-over of rural brigades.

To gain entry to the RFS it now requires similar qualification standards as a government department. Naturally busy rural workers care little for these strict entry requirements hence the dwindling numbers of active fire fighters and a failure to attract new members.

Bureaucracy is trying hard to firmly establish its hierarchal rule across the 30,000 volunteers of the Qld RFS and members dislike creeping regulation.

Rural brigades of the 70's, 80's and 90's needed no government or bureaucratic intervention to put out fires. In fact they were dynamic bodies of farmers and townspeople who kept the bush and small towns safe.

The staid and experienced Forestry department is the government hallmark of fire awareness and management capability. Unfortunately the capable Forestry department stalwarts gradually are being usurped by the environmentalists of the National Parks service along with their failed natural resource management policies.

Forestry for decades has been at the forefront of hazard reduction burning which has greatly assisted the agricultural sector by containing fires to plantations and natural forests.

In my experience Forestry departments should kick out the NPWS environmentalists whose policies have devastated the Australian environment.

Solution to combat harmful ideological vegetation policies

It should be acknowledged the Queensland Vegetation Management Act has cost the agricultural industry dearly in terms of lost production, criminal prosecutions, loss of biodiversity by preventing rehabilitation of thickening and threatening once viable populations of native animals due to wildfire and loss of natural water availability.

If it were not for the provision of a multitude of man-made watering points across the country there would be few colonies of native animals left for conservation bodies to worship.

The Commonwealth could and should revisit the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 to repeal sections which allow the States to stymie sustainable agricultural production and cause land degradation.

Much of the eastern seaboard has become a thickening jungle because of onerous provisions of vegetation management policies which are hindering on-farm soil erosion management strategies, strangling farm production and ultimately causing sediment runoff.

Local government authorities are being overridden by state vegetation policies preventing farmers, the proven, best land managers from protecting their land, ie their livelihood.

Grasslands act as nature's filter for sediment movement during heavy downpours and also provide more oxygen conversion than trees. Wet sclerophyll and rainforest contribute to sediment runoff.

There is no vegetative ground cover in rainforests and water flows virtually uninhibited along the forest floor running into gullies and then creeks and rivers, eventually depositing sediment out to sea.

Nature has provided for mangroves to hold together mudflats along river estuary ecosystems which are the feeding grounds for aquatic life, eg fish feeding and breeding and crustacean habitats.

Environmentalists and governments should be targeting the huge amounts of urban phosphate runoff into oceans caused by detergents and chemicals entering the stormwater system and treated and untreated sewerage being pumped into the sea.

If these fringe conservation bodies were to conduct their misleading and dishonest campaigns against the real polluters being the coastal cities instead of farmers their donated funds would soon dry up.

There would be no life in the sea without soil sediment runoff.

Compiled and written by

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Addendum

ON 19 APRIL 1770, botanist Sir Joseph Banks saw what is now Botany Bay, New South Wales for the first time. In his diary, he noted: “The country this morn rose in gentle sloping hills which had the appearance of the highest fertility, every hill seemd to be cloth’d with trees of no mean size.”

‘Their observations on the openness of the vegetation are part of the huge corpus of literature and illustrations that make a compelling case for the very heavy fire management and ecological modification of eastern Australia by Indigenous people’.... Australian Geographic 2018.